

Encantado

By Eneida Patricia Alcalde González

Noelia sat at her desk by her bedroom window looking out onto the main plaza, bursting with trees, flowers, and grass. Benches dotted its walkways, leading to a central square, but no one sat here mid-day. Even the shade from the trees was insufficient in July, the hottest month of the tropical summer. The heat did not, however, keep away a sloth who clung to the tallest palm in the middle of the plaza. Noelia contemplated him, his claws coiled tight, suffocating the tip of the trunk. He had a funny expression on his face – amused to be the only one to brave the heat.

Too bad Noelia's coloring book did not have a sloth. She examined the zebra she had just finished coloring. It was pink and purple. There were no zebras in Las Cruces. But there were other animals. Most homes had chickens, some had cows, and others pigs. A few had parrots and monkeys that people kept as pets. But, you weren't supposed to keep wild animals, according to Papá. They belonged in the jungle with the other wild animals, like the ostriches, boars, and snakes. Noelia was fascinated by the snakes. Red, blue, and green snakes (the red poisonous), boas that allegedly stole babies at night, and *Encantado*, the largest anaconda (ever) that dwelled in the jungles of the Miraflores River. About once a year, *Encantado* ate a Cruceño to satisfy its tremendous appetite. Most victims were unlucky individuals who succumbed to the ancient laws of the jungle in which *Encantado* reigned with the power to eat whomever he chose. Indeed, few had ever seen the predator and lived to tell the tale. Nevertheless, in the classrooms of her school and hallways of her church, Noelia had overheard whispers of an ancient pact, forged by the settlers of Las Cruces with the beast. Every ten years or so, an adult whose veins pumped with the blood of the original settlers had the power to sacrifice an immoral person to the snake.

If these rumors were true, it meant Mamá had this power... Noelia shuddered.

It had been nearly ten years since the last person had been condemned to *Encantado*. Before Noelia was born, an evil man by the name of Gregor had assaulted several children and had been caught. One of the mothers of the children condemned him, and a week later *Encantado* devoured him. There were conspiracy theorists who murmured that the authorities had left him shackled in the jungle, but no witnesses or evidence could corroborate this information. Ever since then, *Gregor el Abusador* was a song children sang at school to learn about the dangers of trusting strangers.

The last time Noelia had asked Mamá about *Encantado*, Mamá told her to read the Book of Proverbs, where she would find answers. Noelia read until she came upon this passage: "For the Lord will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared." And so she prayed, understanding that even though church was boring, God would keep her safe from *Encantado*. At least, she hoped and, of course, reminded herself to behave around Mamá.

A fat fly buzzed in Noelia's ear. "Leave me alone," she said as she swatted the pest away. She spotted its alien-black body as it landed on the window ledge. From the corner of her hazel eyes, Noelia glimpsed a red pickup truck creeping in from the far end of the road. Curious, she forgot about the fly (and *Encantado*) and pressed her tiny nose to the glass, hoping for a better look. She thought about opening the window, but, if Mamá caught her, she would be in trouble. *Air conditioning is expensive*. She wondered who it could be. Maybe another of those rosy-cheeked foreigners who volunteered with the church? If so, she hoped they brought mints like Señorita

Alicia brought last month, a lady from *El País Grande*, what her Papá called the great country in the North. Noelia liked how she spoke Spanish as if she had marbles in her mouth.

The truck parked in front of her house. A lady stepped out with long black hair that cascaded in layers down her back, which fell behind a sleeveless blue mini-dress that hugged her slim figure. Noelia's strawberry lips parted in awe. The woman had large eyes – one green and one black – set within a canopy of the thickest lashes Noelia had ever seen. Silver hoop earrings dangled from her ears. Red lipstick coated her prominent lips. The woman made her way to her house in white stilettos, probably to visit her family's pharmacy, the only one in town.

"Mamá!" Noelia screamed as she ran out of her bedroom. When she reached the pharmacy, located at the front of the house, Mamá was already attending to the lady in the blue dress.

"¿*Qué pasa?*" Mamá stared at her with one raised eyebrow, the you-better-behave-right-now look Noelia knew too well. Noelia was to stay quiet; otherwise, she'd get a good spanking once they were alone. Noelia blushed, feeling the mysterious woman's mismatched eyes on her.

"Nothing. Wanted to show you the pink and purple zebra in my coloring book," she lied.

Mamá forced a laugh. "Let me finish with the customer. Then I'll take a look."

A man's giggle filled the pharmacy. Noelia wondered where he hid. She could only see Mamá and the lady. Maybe he was an intruder holding Mamá and the lady at gunpoint? That would explain Mamá's edginess. The man giggled again. This time Noelia saw that the baritone sound came from the lady. Noelia scrunched her nose, perplexed as to how a woman could have such a low voice. She diverted her gaze to her yellow flip flops, unsure of what to do or say.

"What's your name?" asked the lady with the manly voice.

"Noelia." She kept her head down and shuffled her feet from side to side.

"That's a pretty name. Pink and purple are my favorite colors. What are yours?"

"Pink and purple. I like yellow, orange, and blue too. Oh and green, like your eye."

The lady grinned, revealing a row of perfectly symmetrical white teeth, like those of the women who cried or died in the afternoon *telenovelas* her Mamá sometimes watched. A small gap marked her smile. Noelia wondered if she could suck in air through the gap as Noelia liked to do when she lost her teeth. But she did not ask this question, or ask why her eyes were different colors. Or why her voice was so deep. (Maybe she had *el gripe*). Noelia had gotten into trouble before for asking customers personal questions and Mamá already appeared upset. So, instead, she asked, "What's your name?"

"My name is Dani. My mother is Doña Luisa. Do you know her?"

"Don Francisco's widow?" Noelia covered her mouth, unsure if she misspoke. Mamá's eyebrow was severely arched.

"Yes," Dani said with a slight frown. "I'm here to take care of her."

"¡*Basta!*" Mamá hissed as she handed Dani a packet of pills. A throbbing vein was visible on Mamá's temple. Dani's eyes flinched, as if a buried wound had been pricked, but managed to keep her smile, hiding any disdain.

"Thank you," Dani said as she clasped the packet of pills with her thin fingers, the nails manicured blue to match her dress. Noelia glanced at her unusual eyes. The green eye was like a brilliant emerald accentuated by a glimmering ring of gold. The black eye was like a stone that held the universe within, its pupil indistinguishable from the iris.

"You must go. The pharmacy is closed," Mamá said with an odd staccato in her voice.

"Yes, yes. Thanks," Dani replied as she stuffed the pills into her white leather purse. She walked out, the click of her high heels ringing out on the floor's tiles. Noelia sniffed the scent of her lavender perfume that lingered in the store.

Noelia ran to Mamá and hugged her, not letting go, hoping her affection would dissuade any potential spanking or condemnation to *Encantado*. “Sorry to come in.”

She inspected Mamá’s stern face, her plum lips sealed with annoyance. “What’s wrong?”

Mamá did not respond. The vein on her temple pulsed.

“Who is Dani?”

Mamá glared at Noelia, the whites of her chestnut eyes red-rimmed from either regret or rage – Noelia couldn’t tell. “There are some things kids should not know.”

“But, I’m nine. Big enough to walk to school by myself. Big enough to read the Bible.”

Mamá shook her head thinking of what to say. “Let’s go in. I want to see the pink and purple zebra.”

Noelia pouted, not excited to show off her artwork. “Okay... but, Mamá?”

“¿Qué?”

“Why does Dani have a man’s voice?”

Noelia noticed a thin sliver of sweat on Mamá’s upper lip. “Because *he is* a man,” she whispered, straightening the straps of Noelia’s yellow tank top with her bronzed fingers. Noelia had twisted the straps while watching the sloth. “Dani is an abomination under the eyes of God. Do not talk to him ever again. I forbid you.”

#

The next morning, Noelia lay in bed thinking of Doña Luisa’s late husband, Don Francisco. He was Las Cruces’ most recent victim to *Encantado*. Noelia had once overheard some girls at school whispering that he had been fishing by the river when *Encantado* came from behind, bit him, and wrapped itself around his paralyzed body before devouring the plump man whole. Poor Don Francisco. Noelia remembered the milkman’s shiny bald head and eager chuckle whenever he greeted you with *buenos días*. Since they found what was left of him last year, Doña Luisa had worn black every day, long past the required deep mourning period of thirty days. “Well, she has always been a good Catholic,” Noelia had once overheard Mamá explain to a group of ladies who gathered for tea and gossip after Sunday mass.

Noelia shivered, remembering her Papá and their neighbor Don Domingo conversing about the ill-fated man. Two boys playing truth or dare had found him still inside *Encantado*, the snake engorged as it digested his body. One of the boys had dared the other into the jungle, a risky proposition with the beast’s ever-present threat.

“They said it lay by the river, fat as can be, quieter than a rock!” Papá said, holding his arms apart to emphasize the snake’s width.

“Yes, and they said its large black eyeballs bulged out from its tiny head with satisfaction as it hissed ‘come to me’ to the boys,” Don Domingo added, scratching his forehead in dismay.

“Lucky for those boys that it couldn’t move, its belly bloated with Don Francisco,” Papá said. “Poor guy, the snake only left his shoes.”

“I hear Luisa now sleeps with the shoes on her bed. The smell of his feet is the only thing she has left. They never found his bones.”

Both men shook their heads in profound sadness, which was strange since Noelia had seen them interact with Don Francisco only a few times, and that was when they were drunk at festivals. Noelia assured herself that unlike Don Francisco, she had no good reason to wander into the jungle where only the strongest survives. The milkman had paid *Encantado*’s brutal price because fishing helped him feed his family. (Delivering milk was simply insufficient to make ends meet). This

year, though, the danger was heightened by an adult having the power to condemn even those who avoided the jungle. Mamá could get so angry when Noelia asked *too many questions* or eavesdropped in *adult conversations*. As much as she tried to not give in to her nosiness, Noelia often failed to keep herself from wanting to know more about how the adult world worked.

She glanced up at the wooden cross with a figurine of *Jesucristo* that Mamá had hung over her bed's white headboard. The half-naked figurine stared at her, comfortably tucked inside her comforter, forever disappointed in its complete pinkness. "Please don't let Mamá condemn me to *Encantado*. I'm sorry I ask too many questions. Sorry I get bored at church. I'll continue reading the Bible, I promise. And God? Don't let Mamá condemn Dani. Her father died last year. He was kind. She has the most beautiful eyes, prettier than my dolls. I wish –"

"Noelia!" Mamá called up the stairs, disrupting her prayer. "Breakfast is ready!"

Noelia jumped out of bed. "Coming," she called out as she slipped on her flip flops. It was a school day.

Fried eggs, bacon, and buttered toast waited for her at the kitchen table. Papá sipped his coffee as Mamá sat reading the newspaper. Their maid Berta was washing the dishes. Noelia kissed both of her parents on the cheek before sitting down. She broke the egg yolks with her fork, watching the orange-yellow goo drip from its tines onto her toast.

"Don't play with your food," Mamá said. "Eat quick. I'll be walking you to school."

Noelia groaned. "But, why?"

"Because I have some errands to run."

Noelia stopped herself from rolling her eyes and ate quickly, not wanting to be late for school. Mamá had arthritis in her knees, meaning the walk would take twice as long.

"Noelia, I heard we had a strange visitor at the pharmacy yesterday," Papá said, his brown moustache twitching as he spoke. "As a pharmacy, we serve everyone, but that doesn't mean we like everyone."

Noelia nodded, understanding that Mamá had told him about Dani. "You don't like Dani?" she asked, assuming he was referring to her as strange.

Papá pressed his lips and placed his forearms on the table as he leaned in closer to her. "We don't agree with Dani. Dani is a confused person. Have you ever seen a boy dressed like a girl?"

Noelia jumped in her seat, her curly brown locks bouncing off her shoulders. "Don Luis dressed as a lady for carnival," Noelia said, proud to recall the rotund man in a blonde wig and gray tube dress, teetering on red heels.

"Ay," Papá said. "But Luis knows that he is a man and his costume was a joke. Dani believes he is a real woman. It is a big difference."

Noelia continued to eat, uncertain of how to respond. After swallowing her food, she asked, "Is that the real reason why Mamá will walk me to school today?"

Mamá folded the newspaper in her lap and shared a quick glance with Papá. "I am going with you so I can stop by his mother's place. It's near the school. I intend to speak with Luisa to make sure he does not come near you."

#

Noelia scowled as she held Mamá's hand on the way to school, a mere four blocks from their home. She was the only nine-year-old walking with their mother that morning, and they walked at a turtle's pace. Her friends pointed at her, guessing she had gotten into trouble. Noelia ignored their taunts, held her head high, and stared straight ahead.

Minutes later they reached a modest white adobe home with a red-brown terracotta roof. Mamá knocked on the light blue door. “Do we have to?” Noelia asked.

“*Silencio*,” Mamá responded in her you-better-behave-right-now voice.

A short lady answered. Jeweled green eyes peered out behind her wireframe reading glasses. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled into a low pony tail. She wore a black blouse and ankle-length skirt. Her stout body reminded Noelia of the barrels Berta used to pickle cabbage, a tradition from Papá’s side of the family, who had moved to Las Cruces decades ago after a war ravaged their homeland.

“*Buenos días*,” the short lady said with a confused wrinkle on her brow. “How may I help you?”

“*Buenos días, Luisa*,” Mamá said. “Dani visited the pharmacy yesterday. I see that he has changed.”

“Ah, Dani, yes. Dani’s always been naughty.” Doña Luisa chuckled to herself.

“He was dressed as a woman.”

Doña Luisa’s grin disappeared as she watched Mamá move her neck to the left and to the right, like the boxers do before a match.

“He flagrantly sins – and he dares to do so in front of my daughter.”

Doña Luisa pushed her glasses up her flat nose. “Dani was getting my pain medicine. You are the only pharmacy in town. What was she supposed to do?”

“She? *He* should have been dressed as his natural-born self.”

Doña Luisa frowned. “What do you want?”

“It is difficult to tell you this, but I *do not* want Dani near Noelia. If he comes near her, I will call the police.”

Doña Luisa stared at Mamá without responding. Within this odd tension, Noelia clutched her school uniform’s green and blue checkered skirt as her stomach churned. *Lord, don’t let Mamá condemn Dani*, she thought. *Please*.

“Then it shall be so,” Doña Luisa said in a soft tone.

Noelia gulped down her relief. She thought about mouthing *gracias* to Doña Luisa for her restraint, but decided against it not wanting to reignite Mamá’s anger.

Doña Luisa turned to Noelia, catching her by surprise. “God may have sent Dani to us as a boy, but she has always been a girl in spirit, like you.”

“*Basta*,” Mamá cut her off. “We need to go. Thank you for your time.”

Doña Luisa shook her head as she went back inside her home. “I hope that you find peace,” she said as she closed the door.

Mamá and Noelia did not talk again until they reached the school. The school’s name, *Colegio Príncipe de Paz* was painted in red capital letters on the building’s gray cement walls. Next to the name was a mural of the Virgin Mary holding baby *Jesús*. Cherubs, flowers, and rainbows floated around the mother and child. The image reminded Noelia of the Book of Proverbs. “Mamá, the proverbs say we do not accuse anyone when they have not done us any harm. What did Dani do?” Noelia spoke in a raised voice for dramatic effect, knowing Mamá would be pleased to know she had been reading her Bible.

“*Muy bien*.” Mamá squeezed Noelia’s hand. “I’m so glad you’re reading your Bible.”

Noelia noticed a quiver in her voice. She also noticed that she did not respond to her question. “But what did Dani do?”

Mamá removed her oversized sunglasses, revealing fresh tears cleaving to the corners of her almond-shaped eyes. “*Hijita*,” she said as she gently tucked a loose curl back into Noelia’s

silver headband. “The Bible also tells us that a woman shall not wear a man’s garment and a man will not put on a woman’s cloak. One day you’ll understand. Until then, may God bless their tortured souls.” Mamá dabbed her moist eyes with a tissue and hurriedly blew her nose.

The school bell rang preventing Noelia from asking more questions – she wanted to understand *now*, but class would begin in the next minute. A wave of boys and girls in ironed uniforms ran past as she and Mamá stood by the school’s entrance.

“Now off to school you go,” Mamá said. She kissed Noelia on the cheek. “*Te quiero mucho.*”

“Love you too,” Noelia replied.

She ran inside, *Encantado* feeling a bit less of a threat than before.

#

“What was that vulgarity doing at your pharmacy last week?” Doña Carmen asked, a wide woman with no neck and bottle-red oily hair.

“Getting pain medicine for his mother,” Mamá whispered, thinking that Noelia was asleep in the pew. But Noelia had her tricks. She pretended to sleep after mass more often than before, hoping to overhear uncensored conversations between her parents and other adults. She had also begun to tiptoe to her parents’ bedroom at night to overhear their conversations through the other side of the door. Noelia still needed to know more about Dani. Why was she such a danger? And why had she once been a boy? The way she saw it, answers to these questions would help her better understand God (who, in her opinion, wrote a pretty confusing book). Perhaps she could use this knowledge to win His full support; to prevent Mamá from ever condemning Dani.

Noelia would have asked Dani these questions herself, but did not want to risk getting her into more trouble if Mamá found out. Mamá could lose her temper as fast as *Encantado* could strike. There was also that possibility of Mamá calling the police, although there was only one policeman in Las Cruces. He sat in his office all day with his feet propped up on his dusty desk. Noelia suspected he could not do much, as did everyone else in town.

Through her covert missions, Noelia learned much about Dani. She overheard that Dani’s full name was Daniel Ortiz, a native of Las Cruces who now studied architecture in the capital, many hours away. She was visiting her widowed mother for the summer, but appeared quite different from the Dani that left years before for university. Some Cruceños even whispered that Don Francisco had staged his death or sacrificed himself to *Encantado* in order to escape his “monster of a son.” While Mamá thought that was nonsense, she believed Don Francisco to be a good man; she nevertheless also believed that Dani was a disgrace. Mamá disliked the shame his “confusion” brought upon Doña Luisa and Las Cruces. At lunch, Mamá made the entire family pray for Dani, Doña Luisa, and Don Francisco’s soul (may he rest in peace) – even Berta had to stop washing the dishes and join in the daily prayer.

One fortuitous day, Noelia was allowed to go home early from school for earning the highest grade for a history assignment, which involved writing a story incorporating elements of what they had learned in class. Noelia’s story was about the *conquistadores*, brave handsome men who traveled across the perilous seas to form noble and righteous civilizations in the West. Noelia the Great, a God-fearing queen, ordered the men’s pioneering excursions, rewarding their efforts with gold and power. Flying dragons accompanied the honorable men on their journey. Beautiful mermaids welcomed them in the New World eager to be saved. Of course, they all lived happily ever after because she made sure *Encantado* did not exist in her story’s world.

Walking home, the sun's heat beat on Noelia's back as she wiped sweat off her neck. Up ahead was a magnificent *toborocho* tree, its many branches lush with clusters of pink flowers. She took a break under its shade, closing her eyes as she leaned against its pregnant trunk, relishing the coolness of the temporary shelter. She pondered if God had taken liberties when writing the Bible as she had with her story. She quickly buried the thought, not wanting to insult Him. Mamá would probably not like the idea either so she decided against bringing it up later.

When she opened her eyes, Noelia gasped. Black and green eyes stared back. She should have known better. The tree was across from Doña Luisa's house and there sat Dani outside in a plastic chair. She wore a denim mini skirt with a simple white crop top. Her flat stomach's olive skin was as smooth as her makeup-free face. Her black hair hung over her shoulder in a thick braid. No earrings dangled from her ears.

Noelia stayed quiet, observing Dani as Dani observed her. Dani brought a lit cigarette to her lips. The tip burned like hot coal as she sucked in its smoke.

"That's a cancer stick," Noelia blurted out, immediately realizing she had broken the safety of their silence. She looked away, feeling her face redden from embarrassment.

"Is that something you learned from your Mamá?" Dani asked.

Noelia did not respond.

"Ah, that's right. I'm not allowed to talk to you: Noelia-from-the-pharmacy. Your righteous Mamá will call the police." Dani's tone was mocking, unlike their prior conversation.

"I guess I will ignore you and keep smoking."

Tears lined Noelia's eyes as she watched Dani suck on the cigarette again, inhaling slowly. Dani did not like her anymore. The realization was a punch to her gut. Unable to control herself, she said, "It's not the police you should worry about. It's *Encantado*."

Dani puffed out the smoke through her perky nose, the same shape as Don Francisco's had been, and squashed what was left of the cigarette into a metal ash tray at the foot of the chair. She walked toward Noelia, her lean legs graceful even with bare feet. She stopped when they were at arm's length from each other.

"What do you mean?" Dani asked.

"Mamá has the power... The power to condemn you. I don't want you to die," Noelia cried.

Dani touched Noelia's shoulder, her hand soothing unlike the muggy air. "When my father died, I swore that I'll never be afraid again. Never be afraid of that snake or of what people think. I hope you don't let fear or someone else's version of God keep you from living your life."

She hugged Noelia. Once Noelia's cries subsided, Dani said, "I'd better go inside in case your Mamá comes." She smiled, her teeth perfect and bright.

"We'll keep this a secret?"

"Our secret. Now go home to your pink and purple zebra. Hopefully one day you can show her to me."

Noelia grinned and resumed her journey home.

When she arrived at her house, it dawned on her that she had forgotten to ask Dani her questions. But now it didn't really matter. She was content learning that God meant something different to everyone. Maybe Noelia's God had wanted her to run into Dani. Maybe her God was on Dani's side after all. She headed up to her room, pulled out her Bible, and read.

#

Despite the storm of gossip that continued to swirl around her, Dani remained firmly in Las Cruces. On Sunday evenings when the townspeople gathered in the plaza to laugh and discuss

the hot weather, Dani and Doña Luisa showed up, arms linked. They sat on a bench as Dani ate a hot dog and Doña Luisa crocheted. Doña Luisa would wear plain black skirts and blouses, while Dani wore sleeveless mini-dresses with her white heels. The dresses were purple, pink, blue, and yellow, all colors that Noelia liked. This was the only time Noelia would catch a glimpse of Dani, spying her from the other end of the plaza where she was corralled with the other kids, whose mothers likewise sought to limit their exposure to Dani's "confusion."

Noelia always could tell when Dani and Doña Luisa arrived on Sunday nights. One or two drunken men would whistle and hurl insults and, thereafter, a loud boom of laughter would erupt from the crowd of onlookers who enjoyed being entertained at Dani's expense. Some mocked her strut by walking on their tiptoes, as if wearing heels, and blinking their eyelids rapidly.

"Why do they do that?" Noelia asked Mamá as they ate sundaes.

"They shouldn't. It's not okay to harass others, even if they are confused. They should ignore him," Mamá replied. She wiped Noelia's mouth, covered in chocolate syrup. "That's what we do, right?"

"Yes," Noelia said thinking about the day she hugged Dani. Mamá had thankfully not found out about the encounter, which had led Noelia to wonder about God. She often asked herself if her God could sway Mamá's. Noelia thought of the recent Bible passage she had read. "Mamá, the Lord says we should show hospitality to everyone, even strangers because they might be angels. How do you know Dani is not an angel?"

Mamá's rouge lips parted and eyebrows raised slightly as she studied Noelia, who had worn her favorite lilac dress, the bottom a puffy tutu in which she liked to twirl. Mamá also wore her Sunday best, a fitted cotton dress, daisies adorned the hem of its white skirt. "*Muy bien*," she said as she placed her hand on Noelia's. "You've been reading your Bible. You're right, there are angels amongst us and we don't always know who they are."

"It's his own fault," Doña Carmen interrupted. She sat next to them, vigorously licking a vanilla ice cream cone. "If he would only dress like a normal man, we wouldn't have to deal with this circus every Sunday. Dani is a he-she mutant, a scandal to his family and our town. I don't blame people for mocking him. Someone needs to teach him a lesson."

"I wouldn't go so far," Mamá said. "He is a person. A confused person, I'll give you that, but harassment and violence won't solve his demons. We should just let him be with his mother and pray for their souls. It must be difficult to lose your father at a young age. Maybe it's a phase."

Doña Carmen snorted her doubt. Vanilla cream dribbled down her hand, melting from the summer evening's warmth. Noelia observed the meandering cream, deliberating when Doña Carmen would wipe herself. As the cream reached her wrist, a sudden hush filled the air. Noelia forced herself to look away from Doña Carmen's sloppy mess. She noticed people running to the other side of the plaza, where Dani and Doña Luisa sat.

"Mamá! Over there!" Noelia cried, pointing at the gathering crowd. Doña Carmen wasted no time and began to walk toward the mass of people, leaving a trail of ice cream on the grass.

"Let's go see. It might be a sloth," Noelia said, hoping that, if that was the case, no one would mess with him. Usually, people kept their distance, afraid of their claws. But Noelia still felt uncertain, knowing how unpredictable drunkards could be – and there was a higher number roaming the plaza on summer nights when the temperatures dipped to bearable.

"Hmm. I'm not so sure, let's go home. Papá should be done watching the game. Besides, you have school tomorrow and it's almost time for bed." Mamá grabbed Noelia's hand and they headed home. As they walked past the now-empty benches, Noelia gawked at the distant crowd,

interested in finding out what the commotion was about. She wondered if Dani was in the crowd, now yelling and hooting. Perhaps the sloth was entertaining them? Or, perhaps it was *Encantado*?

What appeared to be a white bird flew out from the crowd, high into the air, spiraling onto the street, landing with a thud on the sidewalk.

It was no bird. It was Dani's stiletto.

"Her shoe!" Noelia said as she wrenched her hand free from Mamá's grasp who had not seen the flying heel. She ran to it with Mamá running after, her bad knees keeping her from catching up. The shoe lay against the concrete, polished white leather on top of a narrow silver heel. Noelia noticed its purple inner lining and pink insole. She picked it up and continued running.

"Noelia!" Mamá yelled behind her, but Noelia could not stop. She had to give Dani her shoe and make sure she was alright. Noelia knew her God would protect her from *Encantado*, and needed to make sure He also protected Dani from the snake.

"¡PARA!" Mamá screamed as Noelia slipped into the throng of people who cheered and laughed. It was easy for her to wiggle through the adults given her small size. She moved in between and around their bodies to find out what was occurring in the middle of the crowd, like *Encantado* must navigate the trees and plants of the jungle as he scouts his prey.

Noelia finally pushed herself through the inner layer of the pack into the open space. There was a collective gasp from the crowd when she broke in – and then silence. They all watched Noelia holding Dani's shoe. Mamá called out Noelia's name as she shoved her way through.

Noelia saw Dani on the ground sobbing. Violet tears lined her cheeks. Her pink dress was ripped open in the back. Blood gushed from her nose and covered her face. She held herself with her thin arms, some of her manicured nails cracked. A hoop earring lay close by on the floor.

A black-haired young man held her other stiletto, twirling its heel in his hand. He was shirtless and sweaty, and sidewinding around Dani in S-shaped turns. Nearby, another man held Doña Luisa by her arms. The old lady was on her knees, mumbling a prayer to herself.

Noelia bit her bottom lip as she hugged the heel to her chest, rattling from her pounding heart. In her mind, she could not think of how Dani's dignity was different from the sloth's under God's eyes – or any other creature's – and this perplexity compelled her forward. She ran to Dani ignoring the pacing serpent-man.

"Your shoe," Noelia said as she placed it on Dani's lap. She hoped for a reaction, but none came. Instead, Dani kept her head lowered. Her long hair covered the sides of her bruised face. Drops of blood fell from her nose onto the shoe.

As Noelia waited next to her, she detected a hint of Dani's lavender perfume. Noelia whimpered as she breathed in the sweet scent, remembering when they first met. She had avoided Dani and kept their chance encounter a secret, but Dani still had gotten into trouble, awful trouble. Not even her magical green and black eyes could protect her. Or, Noelia's God.

Noelia felt Mamá's hand on her arm.

"You should be ashamed. All of you," Mamá said, a volcano erupting inside her petite frame. "Disperse, before I call the police!"

The man twirling the heel threw it at them, missing Noelia's head by a few inches. Mamá charged at him even though he towered over her.

"*Esa es mi hija*," she spluttered into his face, poking his bare chest with her forefinger.

"And that person on the ground is her child! Are you somebody's child?"

The man hissed in her face.

"Varante, let it go," another young man pleaded from the crowd. "It's not worth it."

Varante gargled and spat phlegm on the floor, as yellow as his teeth, its stray drops striking Mamá's arm. He stepped backwards into the crowd, his beady black stare focused on Mamá. Mamá did not look away, her eyebrows arched with scorn.

"I condemn you to *Encantado*. May justice be served in the eyes of the jungle and our Lord!" Mamá's condemnation crackled across the plaza with the ferocity of a lightning bolt.

The other man holding Doña Luisa quickly let her go and slithered away, not wanting to be condemned as well. Doña Luisa ran to Dani and wrapped her arms around her, stroking her black hair and sticking a handkerchief over her nose to stop the bleeding. Noelia wrapped her arms around Dani and Doña Luisa, and closed her eyes. They stayed in this position, illuminated by the plaza's light posts, while Mamá stood guard as the crowd dissipated.

"*Encantado*, please listen to Mamá," Noelia said, thinking of the fate of the evil man *Gregor el Abusador*.

She opened her eyes and saw the outline of a figure at the top of a palm tree, gripping its trunk. A black shadow against the starry night sky. It must have been a sloth.

She pictured him smiling. Noelia winked.

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A week later, news broke that Varante had been devoured by *Encantado*, the latest sacrifice for Las Cruces. He had gone swimming in the river where *Encantado* tricked him with a hallucinating hiss. At least, that's what Noelia heard from teachers and kids at school. *Varante el Ignorante* was a song they began to sing in class, about the virtues of tolerance.

"Why do you think he went swimming?" Noelia asked Mamá and Papá as they ate lunch.

"Because he was arrogant and foolish, and the Lord does what it will to idiots like that," Mamá replied as she stirred her peanut soup.

Noelia bit into her yucca and chewed on her thoughts. "But, you didn't like Dani either."

Mamá sipped her soup and Papá wiped his mouth with his napkin, perhaps to hide a smile.

"That may be true. But we do not treat people like that, no matter if we do not agree with their choices in life. Besides, as you said, strangers could be angels."

Noelia giggled. Those Bible readings and prayers had paid off – her God had swayed Mamá's and, as a result, her friend was safe. Sensing an opportunity, she asked, "Can we visit Dani? I want to see how she's doing."

Mamá cocked her head as the corners of her mouth curled upwards. "Ay, *claro que sí*," she said as she reached for Noelia's hand. "As followers of Christ, it's our duty to help those who cannot help themselves. We'll bring leftover soup. I'm sure Dani and Luisa will appreciate it."

Noelia slurped the rest of her soup, brushed her teeth, and kissed Papá on the cheek as she said goodbye. She walked with Mamá, holding hands. A cloth bag draped over her shoulder contained her coloring book with the pink and purple zebra, and her crayons.

Just as they reached Dani and Doña Luisa's home, Noelia remembered a question that had been bothering her for some time. "Mamá, I heard the policeman also found Varante's shoes. Why does *Encantado* leave shoes behind?"

"Maybe he doesn't like stinky feet." Mamá winked and knocked on the blue door.

Dani answered. A bandage was taped across her nose and dark circles marked her puffy eyes. Yet, despite the bruises, Noelia saw that her green and black irises glowed with light, full of life. Varante had not taken that – no one could.

"I came to show you my pink and purple zebra," Noelia said.

Dani beamed, revealing her perfect gap-tooth smile.

Noelia ran to her and held her tight. As she embraced Dani, she could see Doña Luisa sitting inside, wearing a yellow blouse and blue skirt.

Noelia glanced back at Mamá. Mamá smiled and walked inside.